

## AN INTRODUCTION TO

# Unarmed Civilian Protection

## What is UCP?

**Unarmed Civilian Protection (UCP) is a methodology and set of practices for the direct physical protection of civilians by trained, unarmed civilians before, during, and after violent conflict.** Through direct protection, UCP supports local civilians as they work to protect themselves and their communities and transform violent conflict.

UCP protects civilians from violence through use of a range of methods, including protective accompaniment and protective presence, community-led safety and security initiatives such as early-warning earlyresponse mechanisms, civilians protecting one another through Women and Youth Protection Teams, conflict de-escalation techniques, civilian ceasefire and peace agreement monitoring, the establishment of weapons-free zones – and much more.

In the longer term, UCP uses civilian-led protection strategies to support and strengthen local peace infrastructures. UCP is a protection practice led by civilians, for civilians that prioritizes leadership and decision-making by communities themselves. It is practiced by communities, NGOs, and other civil society organisations.

UCP cannot be practiced by entities directly associated with, or accompanied by, military personnel (including armed peacekeepers), police, or other armed actors. The practice is grounded in international legal commitments to civilian immunity in war and protections afforded by international conventions.

Key partners around the world, including the [United Nations](#) and the [United States Congress](#), are recognizing the importance of UCP as a response to violent conflict. Since 2007, 29 UN and UN-related policies, recommendations, and resolutions have recognized unarmed approaches for the protection of civilians. From 2019-2023, the US Congress urged consideration of UCP through reports accompanying the annual Appropriations bills.



### CORE PRINCIPLES

- 1 Nonviolence
- 2 Non-partisanship
- 3 Primacy of local actors
- 4 Civilian-to-civilian action



## Where is UCP practiced?

**UCP is practiced in a range of diverse contexts around the world, both through locally-led civilian initiatives, and through formally constituted UCP organisations such as Nonviolent Peaceforce.** NP is a member of the [UCP/A Community of Practice](#) Which supports research, learning and implementation of UCP methodologies across a wide variety of organizations and contexts. Beyond formal UCP organizations, there is also a vast range of community-level UCP initiatives, of which there are countless examples. For example, in 2024 there were 3,312 Community Protection Team members actively leading community safety initiatives in South Sudan alone.

Nonviolent Peaceforce (NP) currently has a UCP presence in Ukraine, Iraq, Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, the Philippines, Indonesia and the United States. In addition, NP has developed an intensive, multi-month virtual UCP course to reach areas of need that do not have program sites nearby.

UCP can and is used to respond to a range of different forms of violence. From the civil war in South Sudan to gun violence and racist harassment in the United States to the peace process in Mindanao, UCP has a crucial role to play in responding to violent conflict.

***NP Current Programs:***  
*Ukraine, Iraq, Sudan, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, the Philippines, Indonesia, United States*

***NP Past Programs:***  
*Sri Lanka, Guatemala, South Caucasus, Lebanon, Bangladesh*

## How does UCP work?

'But how do you protect people without the use of force?' is a common question raised about UCP. Different organisations and communities emphasise different strategies, but [a growing body of academic research](#) and program evaluations has found that at its core, UCP is about **creating and leveraging relationships** with a range of parties to a conflict in order to protect people and reduce violence. The following case studies give some insight into how UCP works to protect civilians in practice.



*NP with community members after providing a safe passage to trapped civilians during a firefight between two leaders. Mindanao, Philippines. 2021 ©NP*

## Case Study 1: Caught in the crossfire

In Mindanao, Philippines, a local UCP team stationed in North Cotabato, received information about a rising armed tension in a nearby village. Elaysa Latiban, a local and NP's field team leader, jumped into action with her team to conduct a security assessment of the area. Elaysa recalled, "Upon reaching the border, we heard the sporadic firing of guns and were surprised to see approximately 30 vehicles with civilians on board, including child passengers, caught in the middle of the road and unable to pass through." Well-known in the area and aware of the dynamics at play, NP accompanied the parade of vehicles and motor riders to safety. No more gunfire was heard during the trip back to safety. Since NP had established relationships with key actors on the ground before the conflict, the team was able to talk to all sides and significantly influence conflict resolution. Not only did NP protect civilians from the crossfire, but the team continued to work after the fight to support by providing protective presence in the negotiations following the firefight. NP joined the ceasefire committee to ensure there is no further retaliation between the parties.

## Case Study 2: Online-offline digital protection

Ensuring a safer digital future requires systemic change—from internet governance to digital platform design to localized initiatives that strengthen community resilience. Advocacy plays a critical role in pushing for these changes—whether by demanding that platforms adopt pro-social design to reduce harm or by supporting grassroots efforts that equip communities with the tools to navigate digital threats. Without intentional action, digital technologies will continue to be shaped by structures that prioritize capital gain over safety, leaving civilians vulnerable to exploitation, disinformation, and violence. By advocating for digital spaces that center protection, transparency, and accountability, we can build a more secure future for all.

For example, digital peacebuilding leaders are pushing for platforms to adopt pro-social design—structuring digital spaces in ways that foster community and social cohesion while reducing the risks of violence and harm. These efforts emphasize the role of platform design in shaping safer digital environments, recognizing that structural choices influence how conflicts escalate or de-escalate online. UCP practitioners also play a key role in advocating for civilian-led protection efforts to be recognized in digital policy discussions. By ensuring that the experiences and expertise of at-risk communities inform policy decisions, they help shape digital spaces that prioritize safety, accountability, and inclusion.